



SPUR

POLICY BRIEF
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Culture As Catalyst

How arts and culture districts can
revitalize downtowns



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The findings and recommendations of this report are SPUR's and do not necessarily reflect the views of those listed here. Any errors are the authors' alone.

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Executive Summary

Downtown San Francisco, Oakland, and San José have struggled to recover from the pandemic both socially and economically. The rise of remote and hybrid work has increased office and commercial vacancy rates and reduced the foot traffic and activity that typically contribute to a vibrant and welcoming urban atmosphere. Local businesses and institutions are finding it difficult to survive and thrive.

In response, the Bay Area's three largest cities have identified the strengthening of arts and culture as a primary strategy to increase social and economic activity. For example, San José is focusing on becoming the entertainment and cultural center of Silicon Valley, while San Francisco emphasizes arts and nightlife in its recovery road map. Oakland has developed a plan centered on culture to promote equity and belonging within the community.

Place-based cultural strategies are not new; American cities have long relied on arts and culture to activate dormant urban areas, draw in visitors, and repurpose vacant properties. Cultural districts play a crucial role in these efforts. These designated areas within cities host unique arts and cultural institutions and can be instrumental in revitalizing disadvantaged areas by investing in cultural amenities that attract tourists and local workers while supporting underrepresented communities. Funding for these districts can come from various sources, including local agencies, community organizations, and private investors.

In the Bay Area, cities have developed different types of cultural districts over many decades. San Francisco's Yerba Buena district serves as a historic example of revitalization efforts, while newer programs focus on preserving community heritage. San José lacks a formal program but has historic districts like Japantown and unofficial districts like SoFA, which celebrate cultural diversity. Oakland has provided direct funding to artists and institutions, and it recently established the Lakeshore LGBTQ Cultural District to uplift the local LGBTQ+ community.

As Bay Area cities consider and plan cultural districts, they can look to the examples of Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia, all of which have successfully implemented arts and culture strategies to enhance their urban environments and support local communities. Each city showcases a unique approach to leveraging public and private investments to preserve cultural identities, engage residents, and revitalize neighborhoods.

Boston promotes a cultural ecosystem through initiatives such as the Boston Creates plan, which emphasizes collaboration among various stakeholders to support artists and cultural institutions. Formal and informal cultural districts reflect its diverse communities while addressing economic challenges through arts-based strategies.

In Cleveland, Playhouse Square, the second-largest theater district in the United States, emerged from grassroots efforts to save downtown venues. The city has established significant public funding for the arts, fostering creative placemaking initiatives that involve local artists in community development, particularly in revitalizing postindustrial neighborhoods.

Denver uses public investment to enhance its urban landscape, creating programs such as Vibrant Denver to activate key corridors and support local arts organizations. The city has analyzed how people navigate areas around entertainment venues and cultural institutions and has identified opportunities to influence visitor behavior by changing the built environment to support increased foot traffic and activity downtown.

Philadelphia's cultural initiatives support a broader revitalization strategy by leveraging dedicated public funding through the Philadelphia Cultural Fund and private partnerships with nonprofits like Meantime to support artists and cultural institutions, activate vacant storefronts, and promote public art. The city has also partnered with local businesses to create a coordinated happy hour program that attracts visitors and increases social activity downtown.

Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia illustrate the importance of tailored, community-centric cultural strategies in supporting urban development and fostering resilience. All of these cities adopted creative placemaking to integrate arts and culture into their post-pandemic recovery plans. Their approaches suggest that sustained funding, good planning, creative uses of vacant spaces, cross-sector partnerships, and public realm investments are key ingredients of successful cultural districts. These case studies provide five lessons in crafting and implementing a successful arts and culture strategy:

- 1. Commit to funding.** Having consistent investments through programs like Percent for the Arts or a dedicated tax allows cities to cultivate cultural assets that serve as economic and social anchors. Cleveland's journey from minimal public investment in the arts to hosting one of the nation's largest arts funds is a testament to the power of grassroots advocacy.
- 2. Plan for the long term.** The Boston Creates cultural plan and the collaboration of the regional Metropolitan Area Planning Council have enabled Boston to adopt a far-sighted, holistic strategy for integrating arts and culture into land use planning.
- 3. Make the most of underutilized spaces.** All of the case study cities have leveraged vacant spaces to create more opportunities for local artists and community organizations. Cleveland's Artists in Residence Program demonstrates how integrating arts into community development can address challenges such as vacancy, population decline, and neighborhood disinvestment. Initiatives like Philadelphia's Meantime, which activates vacant storefronts, show how innovative approaches can transform challenges into opportunities benefiting local artists, entrepreneurs, and neighborhoods.
- 4. Nurture private sector leadership.** Private property owners and investors play a critical role in place-based arts and culture strategies. The success of Cleveland's Playhouse Square,

one of the country's largest theater districts, exemplifies how leadership from private property owners enables the city to save its cultural institutions and spurs broader economic revitalization.

5. Invest in the public realm. Denver's focus on pedestrian connectivity, rebranding, and placemaking provides a blueprint for cities seeking to make the most of public realm investments to strengthen cultural districts.

Establishing and investing in arts and cultural districts and leveraging partnerships with local artists and cultural institutions will not resolve all of the challenges confronting downtown districts in Bay Area cities. However, funding for cultural assets and creative placemaking measures can restore or strengthen communities, support existing businesses and institutions, and create opportunities for new attractions that bring more visitors and investment to the region's urban downtown centers.



Calle 24, Latino Cultural District, San Francisco



Chinatown, Boston



Japantown, San José



Civic Center Cultural Complex, Denver

The Art of Crafting a Cultural Strategy

Downtown San Francisco, Oakland, and San José have struggled to recover after the pandemic. Remote and hybrid work schedules have reduced office use and lowered foot traffic, making it harder for local businesses and institutions to survive and thrive. These conditions have led to high vacancy rates, including in ground-floor spaces that traditionally create a welcoming atmosphere for residents, workers, and visitors.

In response to these challenges, the Bay Area's three largest cities are looking to strengthen arts and culture to increase social and economic activity. Similar initiatives in other American cities have demonstrated that public art, art and cultural institutions, entertainment venues, and other cultural resources enhance the daily life of residents and generate millions of dollars in annual revenue by attracting visitors who support other local businesses.

San José's post-pandemic downtown revitalization strategy has focused on the city's potential to become the entertainment and cultural center of Silicon Valley. Former San Francisco Mayor London Breed's "Roadmap to San Francisco's Future" outlines strategies for economic recovery that emphasize the growth of arts, culture, and nightlife.¹ Even before the pandemic, Oakland's Cultural Affairs Division had developed a plan that centers culture as a catalyst for advancing equity and belonging for Oaklanders.

The idea of a place-based cultural arts strategy is not new. For decades, American cities have leveraged existing arts and cultural resources to activate dormant urban areas, attract new visitors and businesses, and help property owners find new uses for vacant commercial properties.

This policy brief draws lessons from four cities that have made significant public and private investments in arts and culture to preserve and promote neighborhoods and districts: Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia. These cities have relied on mutually beneficial partnerships among local government, business and property owners, community leaders, and artists and cultural institutions to use cultural assets as anchors and attractions. Analysis of their efforts offers insights for crafting and implementing an arts and culture strategy that

- **Creates opportunities for artists, entrepreneurs, and cultural organizations.**
- **Increases the economic health of downtown for property owners and businesses.**
- **Provides a positive experience for downtown residents, workers, and visitors.**

¹ City of San Francisco, "Roadmap to San Francisco's Future," <https://www.sf.gov/departments/roadmap-san-franciscos-future>.

What Are Cultural Districts?

Cities can use place-based and placemaking strategies to preserve, revitalize, or drive investment to designated urban areas, either independently or as part of a public-private partnership. *Cultural district* is a broad designation applied to places within a city that have unique arts, culture, and entertainment institutions and opportunities. Depending on the size of the city, a cultural district can encompass the entire downtown area, a specific neighborhood, or particular blocks and streets.

Cultural districts have been used to drive economic revitalization, uplift underrepresented communities, preserve historical elements of a neighborhood, attract tourists, and streamline arts and culture projects. In areas facing rapidly rising real estate costs, displacement, and gentrification, cultural districts can preserve historic and cultural resources by fostering partnerships among city governments, local artists, and cultural organizations. Cities can also use cultural districts to revitalize disadvantaged areas when decreasing real estate costs offer opportunities to invest in arts and cultural amenities that will attract tourists and neighboring downtown workers. Funding for cultural districts can come from city agencies, residents, or even local investors and business owners.

California Cultural Districts

In 2016, state legislation established the California Cultural Districts pilot program to promote the state's cultural assets. Under the program, the California Arts Council (CAC) administers a competitive application process for communities seeking certification as state-designated cultural districts. Eligible locations must contain "a concentration of cultural facilities, creative enterprises, or arts venues" and serve at least one of the following purposes:

- Attract artists, creative entrepreneurs, and cultural enterprises.
- Encourage economic development and support entrepreneurship in the creative community.
- Encourage the preservation and reuse of historic buildings and other artistic and culturally significant structures.
- Foster local cultural development.
- Provide a focal point for celebrating and strengthening the unique cultural identity of the community.
- Promote opportunity without generating displacement or expanding inequality.

Successful applicants are certified as state-designated cultural districts for five years and may apply for recertification every three years. The state certified 14 cultural districts in the 2017 pilot program, including the SoMa Pilipinas-Filipino Cultural Heritage District and the Calle 24 Latino Cultural District, both in San Francisco, and the Rotten City-Emeryville Cultural Arts District in the East Bay (Exhibit 1). These state-designated cultural districts received a small stipend of \$5,000 until 2019, as well as technical assistance, branding materials, and marketing support. In 2022, the state budget allocated \$30 million to allow the CAC to expand the California Cultural Districts Program to recognize new cultural districts and support existing ones; to date, a new application process has not been opened. To help prevent the displacement of cultural workers who contribute to designated cultural districts, the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 812 in 2023, enabling cities and counties to create housing programs within cultural districts that set aside 10% of affordable housing units for artists.

While the California Cultural Districts Program elevates the visibility and importance of cultural districts, it does not directly provide ongoing funding to support artists, preserve cultural organizations, or prevent the displacement of communities. The districts must rely on public funding from cities, private funding from local businesses, or donations to support artists and the arts.



EXHIBIT 1
California Cultural Districts

In a 2017 pilot program, the State of California certified 14 cultural districts, including the SoMa Pilipinas-Filipino Cultural Heritage District and the Calle 24 Latino Cultural District, both in San Francisco, the Downtown San Rafael Arts District in the North Bay, and the Rotten City-Emeryville Cultural Arts District in the East Bay.

Source: California Arts Council, "California Cultural Districts," 2017, <https://www.caculturaldistricts.org/about-the-districts>.

Bay Area Cultural Districts and Plans

Over the years, Bay Area cities — largely independently of the California Cultural Districts Program — have established their own cultural districts with distinct forms and purposes.

San Francisco

San Francisco began exploring the idea of investing in arts and culture institutions to revitalize neighborhoods in 1976, when Mayor George Moscone advocated for establishing the Yerba Buena cultural district in the South of Market (SoMa) neighborhood to address the area’s high crime rates. The district conditions had been shaped by disruptive urban renewal projects that demolished affordable housing units and displaced the neighborhood’s working-class community in the previous decade. The cultural district designation reflected plans for the construction of new museums to highlight the city’s diverse communities, and it complemented a larger neighborhood plan that incorporated community demands for new affordable housing developments and other neighborhood amenities. Today, the area is home to the

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Contemporary Jewish Museum, the Museum of the African Diaspora, and the Children’s Creativity Museum, as well as extensive gardens with public art, a shopping center, a bowling alley, and an ice rink.

In 2008, local property owners voted to make the Yerba Buena district a community benefit district, a public-private partnership with the city that allows property owners to contribute to a fund for improvement projects in the district. While the Yerba Buena district serves as a useful historic example of how cultural districts can drive economic revitalization, it also serves as a warning against top-down planning approaches that ignore the needs of existing communities.

More recently, the city created the San Francisco Cultural District Program, a community-based program to preserve and enhance the city’s unique history and legacy. Unlike the Yerba Buena complex, which focused on revitalization following community displacement, the city’s new cultural districts seek to preserve and celebrate long-standing communities in certain neighborhoods of San Francisco (Exhibit 2).²

EXHIBIT 2
San Francisco Cultural Districts

CULTURAL DISTRICT	LOCATION	EST.
Japantown Cultural District	Western Addition	2013
Calle 24 (Veinticuatro) Latino Cultural District	Mission District	2014
SoMa Pilipinas-Filipino Cultural District	SoMa	2016
Transgender Cultural District	Tenderloin	2017
Leather & LGBTQ Cultural District	SoMa	2018
African American Arts & Cultural District	Bayview Hunters Point	2018
Castro LGBTQ Cultural District	Castro	2019
American Indian Cultural District	Mission District	2020
Sunset Chinese Cultural District	Sunset	2022
Pacific Islander Cultural District	Visitation Valley/ Sunnydale	2022

² City of San Francisco, “The San Francisco Cultural Districts Program,” <https://www.sf.gov/san-francisco-cultural-districts-program>.

The San Francisco Cultural District Program is a partnership between communities and city government coordinated by the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development, with support from other departments. The program is funded by an annual allocation of a portion of hotel tax revenues, approved by voter measure Proposition E in 2018. Each cultural district, with assistance from city staff, creates a strategic plan called a Cultural History, Housing, and Economic Sustainability Strategies (CHHESS) report. The document establishes goals and strategies to stabilize the culture of the district.

San José

San José has no formal cultural district program but does have several unofficial districts with a high concentration of historic and cultural resources. The city's historic Japantown neighborhood is one of only three remaining Japantowns in the country.³ Its cultural assets have been preserved through community and state investment, and the neighborhood continues to provide vibrant cultural programming for residents and visitors.⁴ Another cultural district, SoFA (South First Area), was created by local business owners seeking to revitalize a neglected section of the city's downtown in the 1990s. Unlike in San Francisco, the district designation refers to a private partnership of participating area businesses, theaters, museums, and cultural organizations, while the term *SoFA* is used to describe the neighborhood in general. Dubbed "Silicon Valley's Creative District," SoFA includes historic theaters, nightclubs, restaurants, public parks, and several museums and galleries, such as the Institute of Contemporary Art San José, the Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, and the San José Museum of Quilts and Textiles.

In recent years, local coalitions have advocated for establishing new, connected cultural districts in and around downtown San José to celebrate and preserve the city's existing arts and cultural resources, activate vacant ground-floor spaces, and revitalize downtown. In 2020, a public-private partnership among the City of San José Council District 3, the city's Office of Economic and Workforce Development, nonprofit organization Project MORE, the San José Downtown Association, and other local businesses funded the establishment of an LGBTQ+ business district called Qmunity on Post Street in downtown San José. Although it is considered a business district rather than a cultural district, Qmunity features distinctive signage, an LGBTQ+ mural, and other amenities to attract visitors and support LGBTQ+ businesses.⁵ In the Mayfair area of East San José, the School of Arts and Culture (SOAC) at Mexican Heritage Plaza has raised nearly \$25 million to support its efforts to establish a cultural district along the Alum Rock Avenue Corridor. SOAC's La Avenida project aims to revitalize the corridor by acquiring vacant commercial properties to expand cultural programming and family wellness services; to build mixed-use retail, education, and affordable housing developments; and to apply for recognition from the California Cultural Districts Program. SOAC believes that becoming an official cultural district would create more opportunities for current residents and businesses while celebrating the history of arts, culture, and activism in East San José.⁶

³ Japantown Business Association, "Japantown Landmarks: Cultural and Historical," <https://www.japantownsanjose.org/landmarks>.

⁴ Senate Bill 307, 2001-2002 Reg. Sess., ch. 879, 2001 Cal. Stat., http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/01-02/bill/sen/sb_0301-0350/sb_307_bill_20011014_chaptered.html.

⁵ Qmunity District, "The Goal," <https://qmunitydistrict.org>.

⁶ School of Arts and Culture, Mexican Heritage Plaza, "La Avenida," <https://www.schoolofartsandculture.org/la-avenida>.

Oakland

Although the City of Oakland adopted a citywide cultural plan that recognizes the value in “naturally occurring” cultural districts and historic neighborhoods, it has not established a formal cultural district program. During the development of the city’s 2018 cultural plan, community members expressed concerns that allocating resources by district could reinforce inequities created by historic disinvestment in vulnerable communities, especially in East Oakland neighborhoods that lack cultural infrastructure.⁷ The city has instead invested in supporting arts and culture organizations through its Cultural Funding Program, an annual competitive grant program established in 1985. In recent years, the program has awarded more than \$1 million in grants to artists and organizations.⁸ In 2014, the Eastside Arts Alliance and several nonprofit organizations in East Oakland formed a coalition to establish the Black Cultural Zone (BCZ). The coalition aims to prevent the displacement of Black residents and businesses from legacy communities in East Oakland by centering Black arts and culture within a community development framework. The BCZ includes 50 square blocks from High Street to the San Leandro border. It is overseen by the BCZ Collaborative, which has focused on building power, securing land, engaging artists and community members in arts activism, and directing funding to community-driven projects in East Oakland as part of its anti-displacement arts and cultural strategy. Though not an official cultural district, the BCZ and its partners fulfill many of the community and economic development functions of such a district.

In 2023, the Oakland City Council passed a resolution to create the Lakeshore LGBTQ Cultural District in the neighborhood surrounding the Oakland LGBTQ Community Center. The district aims to uplift and preserve Oakland’s LGBTQ+ history, create a vibrant and inclusive community, and promote local businesses.⁹

⁷ Cultural Affairs Division, Economic and Workforce Development Department, City of Oakland, *Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan*, September 2018, p. 30, <https://cao-94612.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Cultural-Plan-9.24-online.pdf>.

⁸ City of Oakland, “Cultural Funding Program,” <https://www.oaklandca.gov/topics/cultural-funding-grant-program#grantees>.

⁹ Lakeshore LGBTQ Cultural District, “About,” <https://www.lakeshorelgbtqculturaldistrict.org/about>.

Case Studies

Outside California, four cities have established particularly successful place-based arts and culture strategies. Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia have leveraged strategic public and private investment that supports local artists and cultural institutions to preserve vulnerable communities, attract new visitors and businesses, and revitalize struggling neighborhoods. The following case studies illustrate that arts and culture strategies can best help cities thrive when they are centered on the unique communities and cultural resources, are tailored to achieve desired outcomes, and are supported by partnerships among state and local governments, business and property owners, art and cultural institutions, and artists, cultural practitioners, and entrepreneurs.

Boston

The City of Boston has four official cultural districts, but many neighborhoods rely on arts and culture to build community, attract visitors, and support the local economy. Since 2011, the Mass Cultural Council has provided cultural district designations for urban areas with high concentrations of cultural organizations and programs. Neighborhoods must apply for the designation, and some community organizations have reported that they see little benefit in allocating resources toward completing the application process.¹⁰ Boston's Latin Quarter has leveraged its cultural district designation to celebrate and preserve the existing Latino community's cultural identity as an increasing number of young professionals and families move into the diverse neighborhood.¹¹ On the other hand, the city's Chinatown neighborhood has not applied for a cultural district designation from the state, but local institutions and community-based organizations celebrate Chinese culture and provide important social services. The Pao Arts Center, opened in 2017, offers opportunities for residents to connect with Chinese arts and culture and take courses from a local community college. The Chinatown Community Land Trust, established in 2022, prevents displacement of low-income families and secures permanent affordable housing units and community spaces for Chinatown residents. The city promotes and invests in both official and unofficial cultural districts as part of a long-term strategy to celebrate its diverse communities and make arts and culture part of everyday life.

Like other large American cities, Boston is facing social and economic challenges due to high vacancy rates in downtown office and retail spaces and a dearth of affordable housing. But its

¹⁰ Annis Whitlow Sengupta, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, personal interview, August 20, 2024.

¹¹ Arts & Culture Department, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, *Boston's Latin Quarter Cultural District Plan*, September 2019, <https://www.mapc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BLQ-CULTURAL-DISTRICT-PLAN-FINAL.pdf>.



The 2024 St. Anthony’s Feast in North End, unofficially known as Boston’s “Little Italy.” Events like this street festival not only celebrate unique communities and cultural resources but also support local businesses by attracting visitors and creating a lively atmosphere.

Photo by [Kyle Klein Photography](#), courtesy of Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism

recovery has been aided by a decade-old arts- and culture-based strategic initiative. In 2015, the city released *Boston Creates*, a 10-year cultural plan to align public and private resources to strengthen cultural vitality over the long term.¹² The plan outlines five strategic goals:

1. Create fertile ground for a vibrant and sustainable arts and culture ecosystem.
2. Keep artists in Boston and attract new ones, recognizing and supporting artists’ essential contributions to creating and maintaining a thriving, healthy, and innovative city.
3. Cultivate a city where all cultural traditions and expressions are respected, promoted, and equitably resourced and where opportunities to engage with arts and culture are accessible to all.
4. Integrate arts and culture into all aspects of civic life, inspiring all Bostonians to value, practice, and reap the benefits of creativity in their individual lives and in their communities.

¹² Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture, City of Boston, *Boston Creates Cultural Plan*, July 2016, <https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/embed/b/bccp.pdf>.

5. Mobilize likely and unlikely partners, collaborating across institutions and sectors, to generate excitement about, and demand and resources for, Boston's arts and culture sector.

Boston Creates introduced two new sources of public funding for arts and culture to help make art more prevalent in everyday life and to reflect the city's diversity. The Percent for Art Program devotes 1% of the city's annual capital borrowing budget to art installations at public buildings. The Boston Opportunity Fund receives \$300,000 annually and provides relatively small grants to local artists, creative workers, and cultural practitioners of all disciplines to increase their community impact.¹³ Boston Creates has inspired private partners to find new ways to support arts and artists, including connecting dancers with affordable rehearsal space and encouraging new neighborhoods to apply for cultural district designations.

The City of Boston also participates in regional arts and culture initiatives through the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), a regional planning agency representing 22 cities and 79 towns in the greater Boston region. Inspired by Boston Creates, MAPC added a cultural planner to its staff in 2018 and operated an artist-in-residence pilot program from 2017 to 2020.¹⁴ MAPC now helps cities and towns collect, analyze, and share data about their arts and cultural assets for local and regional benefits. The council works with local, regional, and state partners to identify policy strategies that support creative community development, including removing bureaucratic hurdles that inhibit cross-sector partnerships among local governments, artists, and cultural institutions.¹⁵

Since Boston launched its multi-sector arts and culture strategy in 2017, the pandemic created new challenges for the city's neighborhoods and new opportunities for arts and culture to support the city's recovery. In 2022, the city released *Revive and Reimagine: A Strategy to Revitalize Boston's Downtown*. The report recommended engaging the business and philanthropic community to secure affordable spaces for arts and culture institutions downtown, helping developers and property managers transition traditional office spaces to new uses.¹⁶ This strategy will assist artists and cultural institutions struggling to find affordable workspaces, will make downtown more accessible for new types of businesses, and will encourage the adaptive reuse of vacant office spaces. The city also partnered with the Downtown Boston Business Improvement District to launch the Supporting Pandemic Affected Community Enterprises (SPACE) grant program, which provides grants of up to \$200,000 for small businesses disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 that are looking to fill vacant commercial space. SPACE prioritizes small businesses in food service and production (including restaurants), child care, repair and maintenance, laundry, retail, art, entertainment, creative economy, and fitness, wellness, and recreation. The city has completed

¹³ City of Boston, "Funding Resources for Arts and Culture," <https://www.boston.gov/departments/arts-and-culture/funding-resources-art-boston>.

¹⁴ Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture, City of Boston, "Marking the One-Year Milestone of Boston Creates," 2017, <https://www.boston.gov/news/marking-one-year-milestone-boston-creates>.

¹⁵ Metropolitan Area Planning Council, "Arts and Culture Services," <https://www.mapc.org/our-work/expertise/arts-and-culture>.

¹⁶ Mayor's Office, Office of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion, and Boston Planning & Development Authority, City of Boston, *Revive and Reimagine: A Strategy to Revitalize Boston's Downtown*, October 2022, <https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2022/10/Revive%20and%20Reimagine%20-%20a%20Strategy%20to%20Revitalize%20Boston's%20Downtown%20-%20Oct%202022.pdf>.

three rounds of applications for this program and awarded grants to 61 small businesses.¹⁷ The State of Massachusetts also passed legislation to support downtown revitalization. The Downtown Vitality Act of 2024 adds a sales tax on online purchases to give back to downtown businesses and cultural organizations.¹⁸

Long-range community planning processes at the state and local level recognized the important role that arts and culture play in building and preserving communities and encouraged the City of Boston to invest in cultural districts, local artists, and institutions and to cultivate cross-sector partnerships to support them. MAPC and the cities of Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville were able to leverage this network of relationships with the recent Making Space for Art initiative, which seeks to help prevent cultural institutions from closing due to rising real estate costs and decreased social engagement in the wake of the pandemic. Without established partnerships and cultural planning experience, the city would not be able to respond as quickly to preserve these community assets, which will be needed to support Boston's ongoing recovery.

Cleveland

Decades of planning, investment, and public-private partnerships have shaped the City of Cleveland's arts and culture districts into vibrant and resilient economic engines. These districts have survived several economic downturns and continue to support the postindustrial city's reinvention and recovery. Over the past 50 years, Cleveland has transformed from a city with little to no public investment in the arts to a city boasting one of the nation's largest sources of public support for the arts — a \$12 million annual fund administered by Cuyahoga Arts & Culture. This fund was created in 2006 through a cigarette tax, which has been renewed and increased.

Cleveland's first foray into strategic, place-based investment in arts and culture venues was driven by community advocates, nonprofit foundations, city government, and local business owners collaborating to save important cultural institutions. Today, the city's thriving Playhouse Square is the second-largest theater district in the country, but in the early 1970s, many downtown venues had been abandoned. Inspired by local activists who gained national attention and acclaim by putting on musical productions in venues slated for demolition, the downtown business community commissioned a study that determined that restoring the downtown venues would be a profitable investment, creating jobs and generating revenue from visitors. Since 1982, eight historic Playhouse Square performance venues have been restored and continue to attract local and regional audiences.¹⁹ In 2019, Playhouse Square generated 2,500 jobs, attracted 645,000 out-of-town visitors, and had a direct spending impact of \$225.7 million between the district's local operating investment and visitor spending at local establishments.²⁰

¹⁷ Office of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion, City of Boston, "SPACE Grants," <https://www.boston.gov/departments/economic-opportunity-and-inclusion/space-grants>.

¹⁸ Bethann Steiner, "Supporting Downtown Vitality," blog, Mass Cultural Council, October 18, 2023, <https://massculturalcouncil.org/blog/supporting-downtown-vitality>.

¹⁹ Carolyn Jack, *Elevating the Influence of Arts and Culture: A Cleveland Playbook*, Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, 2018, https://assemblycle.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FinalPlaybook_6-12_lo-res.pdf.

²⁰ Tourism Economics, *Playhouse Square: A Regional Economic Engine — Economic and Fiscal Impacts*, 2019, https://www.playhousesquare.org/assets/doc/Playhouse_Square_Economic_Impact_Study-2a0c0ccca2.pdf.



Cleveland's Playhouse Square is the country's second-largest theater district. In 2019, it generated 2,500 jobs, attracted 645,000 out-of-town visitors, and had a direct spending impact of \$225.7 million.

Photo by [Michael Spring](#)

The successful revitalization of Playhouse Square did not immediately lead to more widespread investment or public sector funding for arts and culture institutions throughout the city. However, by the 1990s, concerned community leaders and advocates came together to study the challenges that continued to plague artists and institutions in Cleveland, ultimately forming the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture (CPAC) to educate the public and advocate for policy changes to foster public sector investment in the arts. CPAC implemented a data-driven education campaign, releasing an influential report in 1999 highlighting \$1.3 billion in revenue generated by regional arts and culture activities in Northeast Ohio. Local elected officials and their constituents increasingly recognized the economic importance of investing in this sector. In 2002, the Cleveland City Council authorized CPAC to host a summit for local artists and community members to develop public policy recommendations that would foster the development of the arts and cultural industry for Cleveland and the region.²¹ The summit and subsequent community roundtables helped build grassroots support for public funding for the arts and laid the groundwork for important policy victories:

²¹ Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, *Cleveland City Council Arts and Cultural Summit Report*, October 2002, p. 5, <https://assemblycle.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Cleveland-City-Council-Arts-and-Cultural-Summit-Report.pdf>.

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- In 2001, the City Council passed a live-work ordinance to allow artists to turn disused industrial buildings into safe home and studio spaces.
 - In 2003, the City Council established a percent-for-art ordinance, requiring Cleveland public building projects to allot 1.5% of their construction budgets for public artwork in and around the new structures.
 - In 2006, Cleveland voters approved Issue 18, a ballot measure that placed a 30-cent tax on packs of cigarettes to support the Cuyahoga Arts & Culture fund. The tax was renewed in 2015. In 2024, voters approved an increase of the tax to 70 cents per pack to generate an additional \$160 million in funding over the next 10 years.

The 2008 Great Recession ultimately led to the development and implementation of a bold creative placemaking program in Cleveland's North Collinwood neighborhood. *Creative placemaking* is the intentional integration of arts and culture into a comprehensive community development strategy. In North Collinwood, a postindustrial neighborhood on the south shore of Lake Erie, a community development corporation called Northeast Shores partnered with CPAC to launch a pilot program that involved local artists in community building as part of efforts to revitalize the neighborhood. The program, Artists in Residence, aimed to

- Recognize, honor, incorporate, and nurture indigenous cultural assets.
- Tie artists to community through property ownership.
- Initiate small, artist-led projects that spread roots in the community.

The 2009–2013 program was massively successful and led to national recognition for North Collinwood's arts community. Artists in Residence created a coalition of residents, local artists, arts-oriented businesses, and city government agencies to complete a series of community development projects that helped reverse local population decline, rebuild a central commercial corridor around arts businesses, and restore a positive identity to the neighborhood.²² The program provided opportunities for participating artists to purchase affordable homes in North Collinwood, reducing the number of vacant houses and spurring property improvements and community art projects. Existing residents benefited from the revitalization and revenue as the budding creative community attracted new businesses and investment to the neighborhood.

Cleveland's successes demonstrate that creative placemaking through arts and culture is not only a viable strategy for urban revitalization and economic development but also a way to engage residents and foster the growth of vibrant and resilient communities. By leveraging and preserving existing cultural resources, local stakeholders in Cleveland were able to identify opportunities to help neighborhoods weather economic downturns and thrive again.

²² The Kresge Foundation, *Creative Placemaking Case Study: North Collinwood*, https://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/cleveland_cp_full_case_final_sep_25_1_links_corrected_6282017.pdf.

Denver

The City of Denver has leveraged public investment in arts, culture, and entertainment to activate urban corridors, enhance public spaces, and attract visitors and businesses. In 1986, the Colorado State Senate passed legislation to create the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD), which serves the seven-county Denver metropolitan area. The SCFD collects a 0.1% sales tax to support local cultural organizations, distributing \$80 million to more than 300 organizations each year.²³ Another key piece of state legislation allows municipalities to fund downtown economic development projects by collecting a portion of the incremental taxes generated within the central business district through a Downtown Development Authority (DDA).²⁴ The City of Denver established a DDA in 2008 to support the redevelopment of Denver Union Station and is currently working to update and expand the DDA to fund transformative public investments in the downtown core.²⁵ Denver voters approved a \$570 million bond measure to support downtown revitalization, to be repaid through tax increment financing generated by the updated DDA.²⁶ City leadership plans to use this revenue to revitalize a major downtown corridor along 16th Street, one of the main downtown arterial streets. The focus area is bounded by Union Station at one end and Civic Center Park and a cluster of government buildings at the other. The initiative, Vibrant Denver, aims to activate retail, arts, and culture along this corridor to rebrand and revitalize the city's dormant downtown.

Denver has an established local government agency, Denver Arts & Venues (DAV), that oversees public investment/support in public venues, the arts, and entertainment. DAV will play a key role in Vibrant Denver in partnership with the city's economic development agency. DAV is currently investing in window activation along the 16th Street corridor by partnering with artists and art studios to add temporary art and sculpture installations. DAV also operates a busker program, which uses live music as an activation tool and pays artists to draw foot traffic to retail businesses. The agency has explored ways to include students from nearby universities as design and production partners for downtown activation rather than simply as consumers. DAV previously partnered with local university students to design carts for small businesses operating along the 16th Street corridor. A local nonprofit arts organization, RedLine, is also working to activate vacant retail spaces in downtown Denver. RedLine partners with developers and connects them with artists who can provide ground-floor activation in exchange for low-cost leases of workspaces on other floors.

Vibrant Denver will leverage existing cultural resources and previous public investments in the arts and culture sector, particularly in and around the city's Performing Arts Complex. The

²³ Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, "Our History," <https://scfd.org/who-we-are/our-history>.

²⁴ Public agencies use tax increment financing (TIF) to finance community improvement or infrastructure projects, typically in municipal areas that need significant public and private investment for economic revitalization. The agencies can borrow money equal to the amount of anticipated revenue from annual real estate tax increases on each parcel within a specific district for a set period, typically 20 to 30 years. Cities must establish a special TIF district with set boundaries. Public and private investment in the TIF district increases property values, and revenue captured from all incremental increases to property taxes allows public agencies to repay monies borrowed to pay for up-front project development costs.

²⁵ Downtown Denver Partnership, "\$500 Million Investment to Recharge Downtown Vibrancy and Stimulate Economic Growth," May 9, 2024, <https://www.downtowndenver.com/newsroom/dda-may-2024>.

²⁶ Ysabelle Kempe, "Denver to Invest \$570M in Downtown Revitalization After Voters Pass Bond Measure," *Smart Cities Dive*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/denver-downtown-revitalization-funding-ballot-measure-passed/732360>.



Attendees enjoy the 2020 For the Culture Convention, a collection of live performances, fashion, art, and food vendors that was curated to celebrate Denver's cultural resources.

Photo by Michael McGrath, courtesy of Denver Arts & Venues

Performing Arts Complex is a 12-acre site with 14 unique entertainment venues, public open space, and a sculpture park connected by a glass canopy. This downtown anchor attracts many visitors, but the city is looking to activate areas between venues by adding amenities such as food and drink vendors, restrooms, and greenery around parking structures to encourage visitors to linger after performances and visit more downtown establishments. The city is also exploring a public-private partnership to construct the tallest mural in the world and add a climbing wall downtown.

Downtown Denver includes or neighbors other anchor institutions, but two eight-lane thoroughfares and many railroad tracks divide the city center into distinct areas and make it difficult for pedestrians to access and move among these institutions. A combination of public and private investment could improve pedestrian walkways to make downtown more walkable and connected. The City of Denver and the State of Colorado are exploring options to build pedestrian connections between city and county buildings and the state capitol. A privately financed mixed-use development proposed for the nearby Ball Arena would also build pedestrian bridges to connect the arena — as well as 6,000 proposed housing units and Auraria Campus, a higher

education hub for three universities with 40,000 students — to the rest of downtown.²⁷

These improvements will be enhanced by a creative placemaking and rebranding campaign as the city explores adding arches, lighting, and signage to create a “destination feeling” that is unique to downtown Denver. Major construction and improvement projects downtown have resulted in a difficult environment for businesses, but the city aims to reopen one to three blocks at a time and strategically time announcements with the rebranding to ensure ease of access.

It’s too early to evaluate the impacts of Vibrant Denver, but if it succeeds, it may provide a blueprint for downtown revitalization through creative placemaking focused on arts and culture venues and institutions. RedLine’s efforts to activate ground-floor retail spaces by bringing in artists and small businesses could be particularly instructive as cities across the country continue to grapple with post-pandemic commercial vacancies.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia has invested in promoting and preserving its vibrant art and cultural resources for decades, cultivating partnerships and programs that can now support post-pandemic recovery. In 1991, the city partnered with local art leaders and community members to form the Philadelphia Cultural Fund (PCF), a nonprofit organization that provides funding to enhance the city’s cultural life. PCF receives annual funding from the city budget (around \$2.5 million) and supplemental funding from donations. In 2024, PCF awarded \$3.6 million in grant funding to 262 arts and cultural organizations.²⁸ Philadelphia is also familiar with using public art as a tool for urban revitalization. The city operates the nation’s largest mural arts program, which provided public health information to vulnerable communities during the pandemic and now helps activate vacant spaces with small art installations. A report by the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance found that cultural organizations in Southeast Pennsylvania had a combined economic impact of \$3.3 billion on the five-county region in 2023.²⁹

In 2023, the architecture firm ISA formed a nonprofit organization, Meantime, to address the rising number of vacant storefronts in the wake of the pandemic. Meantime receives financial support from the City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce, the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation, a community-based art project called Shuttle Service, and private donors. The nonprofit facilitates partnerships among the real estate industry, city government, landowners, neighborhood stakeholders, and local artists and entrepreneurs to incentivize commercial landlords to activate vacant storefronts. Both before and after the pandemic, many property owners chose to keep premium commercial spaces vacant for long periods of time, holding out hope of attracting an established business willing to sign a traditional, 5- to 10-year commercial lease. This trend creates a vicious cycle whereby numerous vacancies negatively impact remaining businesses in downtown and commercial districts by lowering perceived safety for visitors and discouraging new businesses

²⁷ Bret McCormick, “Mixed-Use Project for Denver’s Ball Arena Plans to Expand Downtown,” *Sports Business Journal*, October 14, 2024, <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Articles/2024/10/14/facilities>.

²⁸ Philadelphia Cultural Fund, *Annual Report 2024*, June 2024, p. 10, <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/51ff7851f7.html#page/7>.

²⁹ Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, *Arts, Culture & Economic Prosperity: Greater Philadelphia*, April 2024, p. 5, <https://philaculture.org/sites/default/files/Arts%2C%20Culture%20%26%20Economic%20Prosperity%20Greater%20Philadelphia.pdf>.



Philadelphia's Center City District SIPS is a weekly Wednesday night series offering discounts at more than 90 bars, restaurants, and beer gardens. In 2024, SIPS drew an additional 28,000 people downtown, on average, compared with a typical summer weekday, bringing much-needed revenue to local businesses.

Photo by [BeauMonde Originals](#)

from moving into these neighborhoods due to low visitor traffic. However, the ongoing demand for street-facing commercial space among new and smaller businesses could activate these spaces and attract new visitors and investment to downtown and historic neighborhoods.

Meantime facilitates low-cost, short-term agreements between landlords and local artists and entrepreneurs, lowering the risk threshold for landlords by helping them obtain temporary certificates of occupancy with minimal up-front investment. Over the past year, Meantime has hosted four 30- to 60-day activation events in neighborhoods throughout Philadelphia, drawing attention to vacant spaces in support of longer-term leasing efforts while activating streetscapes and helping local artists and entrepreneurs sell goods and build brand awareness with physical retail spaces and temporary art installations.³⁰

In the future, Meantime hopes to create a more predictable round of opportunities for local artists, entrepreneurs, and small business owners rather than relying on relatively short-notice pop-up events. The City of Philadelphia has recognized the value of this initiative and may investigate streamlining the process for commercial landlords to obtain short-term occupancy

³⁰ IS Architects, "What If Vacant Storefronts Could Be Employed to Test Creative Ideas for Retail?," <https://www.is-architects.com/meantime>.

permits to facilitate the activation of vacant spaces with nontraditional tenants and lease agreements. While there are many opportunities to improve the activation process, landlord education remains the primary barrier to short-term activation. Meantime and other stakeholders continue to reach out and share information with property owners about the harmful impacts of vacancies on businesses and the community and the benefits of ground-floor activation through short-term agreements with nontraditional tenants.

Philadelphia is more experienced in retail conversions than Bay Area cities. To support its large residential population, the city has been converting vacant retail spaces into day care centers and other community anchors. The city hopes to build on its past success by facilitating more retail/office conversions in downtown districts and by providing amenities such as affordable child care to incentivize workers to return. In addition, city leadership is rethinking public programs to appeal to a younger audience (mainly local university students) and to encourage workers to return to the office and patronize local businesses, particularly with evening events such as its long-standing Wednesday happy hour program, SIPS. On Wednesday evenings between June and August, dozens of participating local restaurants offer discounted food and beverages between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. In 2024, SIPS drew an additional 28,000 people (visitors and nonresident workers) downtown, on average, compared with a typical summer weekday, bringing much-needed revenue to local businesses and increasing ridership on the local transit network, SEPTA. SIPS is concentrated in the Center City area, but the event also attracted more than 5,400 nonresident workers to the nearby West Market Office District, which has lagged other districts in post-pandemic foot traffic recovery.³¹

³¹ Center City District, "A Successful Summer With CCD SIPS 2024," blog, September 25, 2024, <https://centercityphila.org/blog/successful-summer-with-ccd-sips-2024>.

Cultural Planning for Success

The examples of Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia underscore the transformative power of arts and culture as tools for community development, economic recovery, and urban revitalization. These cities, despite their varying levels of resources and challenges, have all adopted unique strategies to integrate arts and culture into their post-pandemic recovery plans, using creative place-making as a central theme. Their approaches make it clear that sustained funding, good planning, creative uses of vacant spaces, cross-sector partnerships, and public realm investments are key ingredients of successful cultural districts.

Five other lessons can be gleaned from these case studies:

- 1. Commit to funding.** Having consistent investments through programs like Percent for the Arts or a dedicated tax allows cities to cultivate cultural assets that serve as economic and social anchors. Cleveland's journey from minimal public investment in the arts to hosting one of the nation's largest arts funds is a testament to the power of grassroots advocacy.
- 2. Plan for the long term.** The Boston Creates cultural plan and the collaboration of the regional Metropolitan Area Planning Council have enabled Boston to adopt a holistic strategy for integrating arts and culture into land use planning.
- 3. Make the most of underutilized spaces.** All of the case study cities have leveraged vacant spaces to create more opportunities for local artists and community organizations. Cleveland's Artists in Residence Program demonstrates how integrating arts into community development can address challenges such as vacancy, population decline, and neighborhood disinvestment. Initiatives like Philadelphia's Meantime, which activates vacant storefronts, show how innovative approaches can transform challenges into opportunities benefiting local artists, entrepreneurs, and neighborhoods.
- 4. Nurture private sector leadership.** Private property owners and investors play a critical role in place-based arts and culture strategies. The success of Cleveland's Playhouse Square, one of the country's largest theater districts, exemplifies how leadership from private property owners enables the city to save its cultural institutions and spurs broader economic revitalization.

5. Invest in the public realm. Denver’s focus on pedestrian connectivity, rebranding, and placemaking provides a blueprint for cities seeking to make the most of public realm investments to strengthen cultural districts.

Establishing and investing in arts and cultural districts and leveraging partnerships with local artists and cultural institutions will not resolve all of the challenges confronting downtown districts in Bay Area cities. However, short- and long-term funding for cultural assets and creative placemaking measures can restore or strengthen communities, support existing businesses and institutions, and create opportunities for new attractions that bring more visitors and investment to the region’s urban downtown centers.



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